

Year 11 – A Level Preparation Work

The subject of “Philosophy” has many branches. Some ask questions about the nature of truth, and knowledge (often known as “metaphysics” and “epistemology”) Some answer questions about right and wrong, how we know and decide what is right and wrong, and what words like “right”, “wrong”, “good”, and “bad” even mean. This large branch is known as Ethics. Philosophy also asks questions about God, the afterlife and whether it is reasonable to believe in things we cannot see or prove, this is known as “The Philosophy of Religion”, finally philosophy sometimes delves into politics, art, maths, science, language and pretty much every subject you’ve come across in your schooling.

When you study for a PhD (in other words, become an expert in a subject), you are studying to be a Doctor in the Philosophy of (Ph-D) your subject. Philosophy, and the kinds of questions it asks, help experts in every subject unpack and investigate what they are studying.

When you begin your A Level in Philosophy and Ethics, you begin your proper journey to become a philosopher and you will have to be prepared to learn skills like:

1. How to write good arguments. You will learn what different kinds of arguments there are, and how to attack them in the right places
2. How to read difficult and challenging philosophical texts. You will gradually learn how to get used to them, and read between the lines to what the philosopher is really trying to say
3. How to work out different ways people “know” something is true, and which ways are better and more reliable, and which aren’t.

You have been introduced to some Ethics already, when you studied War and Peace, and Religious Dialogues at GCSE. Some of the questions about what to do when faced with issues like abortion, euthanasia, nuclear weapons etc. are classic ethical questions. Now, we take those arguments a step further: instead of looking at “our opinions” we have to look at where these opinions might come from, and whether they make sense, or are reasonable opinions at all.

Another thing we often assumed at GCSE was that God is real, and is all-powerful, and all-loving. In philosophy we question these assumptions and ask whether there is any evidence for God at all. Is it reasonable to believe in God when there is so much suffering? Are events like miracles likely to be real, or made up? Do people actually experience God, or is it imagined?

The following tasks are designed to help you become more acquainted with the disciplines of Philosophy and Ethics. There will be some readings, some note taking and some small written tasks to get you thinking and in the right zone for the A Level. It is also quite interesting, and so I’d advise reading through and having a think even if you’re not doing the A Level.

Philosophy: Part 1

Task 1: Read the following introduction and make notes on:

1. The word philosophy
2. Plato
3. Socrates

The word “philosophy” means “love of wisdom” and was (most probably) coined by a Greek man called Plato, who was alive about 2,300 years ago. He lived in Athens, and ran a school called the Academia (where we get our word “Academy” from!) for young Greek boys whose parents were interested in education. They would have learnt philosophy, mathematics, possibly astronomy and some even argue a very ancient version of what we now know as “science”.

Plato is the man who invented philosophy as we know study it. His method of asking questions, investigating, doubting, using logic and reason to come to a conclusion that he believed to be true has been passed down through the generation to today.

He is also famous for being the first person to ask questions about what we call “philosophical concepts” which are key ideas in philosophy (like “key words”). They include concepts like justice, truth, goodness, virtue, and fairness. Plato was concerned with how to define these words, and how we even **know** how to define them?!

Plato’s mentor was called Socrates, and all of Plato’s books on philosophy that he wrote are in the forms of dialogues (like the scripts of plays), and Socrates is always the main character. Many believe that Socrates is really the person to inspire Plato, and his ideas. Socrates, as we will see, was executed by the government in Athens for spreading anti-Athenian sentiment and “corrupting the young”. In other words, he criticised the government and many of its decisions, and encouraged others to do the same. Socrates famously was angry about the wars that the Athenians were embarking on, saying they are forgotten what was really important: what was really good and bad. Socrates to many was the first true ethicist (someone who does “ethics”).

In the next task, you will look at the first philosophers including Socrates, Plato and many others. You will learn about the kinds of questions they asked, the issues they debated and disagreed on, and the way they “did” philosophy

Task 2: Read Graphic Philosophy and make notes under the following headings:

Top tip: this is good practice at making detailed, helpful notes. You can include questions you have, and you own thoughts in your notes to help you understand them later on. You don’t have to write the headings out – just make sure you have notes on each of them:

1. What is philosophy?
 - a. The branches of philosophy
 - b. What philosophers do
2. Socrates
3. Herodotus
4. Protagoras the Sophist
5. Socratic Dialogue
6. Socrates Death (why did he die?)
7. Plato
 - a. When did he live?
 - b. What’s his background?
 - c. What did he care about it?
 - d. What is “innatism”?
 - e. What are the “ideal forms”?
 - f. Who can see the forms? Why?
 - g. What is the Parable of the Cave?
 - h. Parable’s meaning (explain – chains, shadows, fire, reality, painfulness of moving)
 - i. What do philosophers believe their job is?
 - j. Dangers of this
8. Aristotle
 - a. Who he was
 - b. His life story
 - c. Deductive logic
 - d. Syllogisms
 - e. Nature of Induction

- f. Theory of Final Causes
- g. Nature of teleological arguments
- h. Disagreement with Plato about forms vs substance
- i. His understanding of the soul
- j. His version of “ethics” – moderation
- k. Virtue Theory

Task 3: Have a think about the questions below and jot down your answers in your notes:

1. What was the main difference between Aristotle and Plato?
2. Why might Plato argue that only philosophers can see the “forms” for what they really are?
3. What might a person have to do to be able to “see the forms”?
4. How might someone who follows Aristotle’s teachings respond to the issues of a) euthanasia, b) corporal punishment. Explain why?
5. What “big questions” have you seen be asked in the text. Make a list.

Task 4: Read pages 1-9 of *Intro to Philosophy*

1. What is epistemology?
2. What is a “rational explanation”?
3. What is the difference between knowledge and belief?
4. Why is knowledge preferable to belief?
5. What is “the problem of knowledge”?
6. Think of something you know – explain *how* you know it. Do you think that piece of knowledge is really knowledge, or just belief?
7. What was Xenophanes problem with pure “rational thinking”?
8. How did Socrates help people “do philosophy”? What did he assume? How did that help?

Task 5: Read pages 10-16 of *Intro to Philosophy* and answer the following questions:

1. What are the two schools of thought on how we have knowledge?
2. How did Plato highlight the existence of innate knowledge?
3. How and why did Aristotle disagree?
4. Why should we not trust our senses?
5. What did Descartes have to say about this 2000 years later?
6. Descartes is famous for coining the phrase “I think therefore I am”. What do you think he means by this?
7. What did George Berkeley argue about our senses, and sense knowledge?
8. What do you think – innate, rational knowledge or sense knowledge? Which is more reliable and useful? (You are allowed to say “both in different ways” – just explain why)